

SERMON FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT - 2015

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Christ is in our Midst! He is and ever shall be!

Today on the fourth Sunday of Great and Holy Lent, the Church places before us a spiritual giant, a man of great faith, to encourage us as we continue on our Journey to Holy Pascha, to the Resurrection of our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Today, we remember St. John of the Ladder, a seventh century abbot or superior of the Monastery of St. Catherine the Great on Mt. Sinai.

St John is well known for the holy life he led and his well articulated counsels on the spiritual life.

St. John wrote a book called the Ladder of Divine Ascent, which gives the reader practical advice in overcoming the sins and passions, and obtaining the virtues.

His book consists of thirty three chapters or rungs, which correspond to the years our Lord Jesus Christ lived on the earth. Each chapter or rung gives insight about the vices that we as humans struggle with and the virtues that we strive to achieve.

While this book was written for monks, it has great meaning to all Christians, because in the Orthodox Church, we do not have two spiritualities: one for monks and priests and bishops and another for lay people. St. John, teaches us that life is a journey, an upward movement to the Kingdom of heaven.

I don't know if you have ever seen the icon of the Ladder of Divine Ascent. Of course there are 33 rungs and on the one hand you see angels helping people up the ladder and on the other, demons pulling people off the ladder. What is frightening for me to see is that many of those who have fallen off the ladders are priests, bishops and monks which the demons work overtime to lead astray.

Great Lent is given to us to help us get back up on the ladder and to renew our desire to climb it. If you think about it, all of us have at one time or another have been faced with some project or obligation we have to accomplish. I know our students have many projects and papers to write. And isn't it true that sometimes, the very thought of what we have to do, is worse than actually doing. It? Don't most of us put off or procrastinate something that seems overwhelming to us? But isn't it true that once we start it , it is usually not as bad as we imagined? Isn't the hardest part getting motivated?

The same is true in the spiritual life and that is why the Church during this time of year does all it can to motivate us, get our attention, and help us climb the ladder which leads to heaven. During Lent the church introduces a total culture change, the altar covers change to purple, the lights are dimmed at the evening services so we focus more on the candlelight silhouettes of the icons of the saints, who light our path, rather than on those around us... Does she not help us to pray by setting a rule of fasting for us so we are lighter in body and more attentive in spirit so that it is easier to pray? Does she not encourage us to lose our lives, that is to pay more attention to the needs of others, helping the less fortunate, so that we can find eternal life?

During Great Lent, the Church reminds us that we have become prisoners to sin and need to escape. In order to do so we have to spiritually exert ourselves as did St. John of the Ladder. He prayed intensely, fasted strictly and gave unselfishly to others. And in return, he received a great gift from God,. He experienced with great intensity the Love of God, which is the crown of all virtues... This is what life is all about.. the purpose of life is to experience and share the Love of God with those around us...As Metropolitan Nicholas of Blessed Memory said in his farewell words to the diocese four years ago, it is not important how many years

we live, but rather the quality of our life, and have we lived a Christian life of giving to others, or have we been merely wrapped up in ourselves?

In this morning's Gospel reading we heard the familiar account of our Lord's healing of a young child who was possessed by a demon. His life was terrible, he was out of control, he was tormented. The father of the child turned to the Lord's disciple for help. They tried but were not able to cure him. Of course Our Lord was able to do so, and after healing the child, He explained why His disciples were not able to heal him because this satanic power could only be overcome by intense prayer and fasting.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the Church is asking you and I an important question this morning. Where are we on the Ladder of Divine Ascent? Have we fallen off? Or God-forbid, are we no where near the ladder?

If you are climbing on the ladder and moving slowly but surely closer to God, then thank him today for this blessing, and guard yourself from pride so that you stay on it. If you are stuck on a rung, or are moving down rather than up, or if you have fallen off, don't be discouraged. Get back up and reach higher. To do so requires great effort, it requires increased prayer and fasting and calling on God's help.

Without prayer and some level of fasting ,spiritual growth is impossible and Lent will be a great disappointment. Easter will come and go and be just one more hum day.

No matter where you and I are right now on the ladder of Divine Ascent, be of good cheer. Don't be discouraged, as there is still time to get back into the game so to speak, and climb higher. We still have 21 days to go until Pascha!

During these remaining days pray for an increase in love! Take time, to reflect on all of your many blessings, remind yourself how much your spouse, your children, your parents, your friends and fellow parishioners mean to you... By following St. John's example when pray and fast more intensely, when we focus our attention on serving others instead of our self, and when we make time to experience the beauty of our Orthodox Lenten Services, our hearts are softened and we are more open to experiencing the Love of God. It is God's love energizing our body and soul that will lift us up to the top of the Ladder of Divine Ascent where we will experience the radiance of the un-waning light of Christ's Holy Resurrection in the Kingdom of Heaven... May this be so....Amen.

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